

Columbia flier

CSX rail car facility could move to Howard County

Prospect of Elkridge site stalls final decision on new elementary school

By Lindsey McPherson

lmcperson@patuxent.com and

Sara Toth

stoth@patuxent.com

Posted 2/25/11

Howard County could become the new home of the CSX Corp.'s railroad car container transfer facility.

But one possible site in Elkridge, close to a planned mixed-use development and a proposed new elementary school, has county elected officials and community members worried.

CSX Corp., a rail-based transportation company, is working with the Maryland Department of Transportation to move its container transfer facility, where large containers of freight are moved from trucks to trains out of the Port of Baltimore.

A dozen possible sites for the move have been identified and while officials declined to identify the exact locations, two of the 12 are in Howard County, according to Leif Dormsjo, the chief of staff to the Maryland Secretary of Transportation.

In a briefing to the Howard County state delegation Wednesday, Dormsjo said one of the potential sites is in Jessup, the other in Elkridge.

It is the Elkridge site, which is near the commuter rail station, that has aroused concern.

Dormsjo said the site was rezoned last year from industrial land to mixed-use land to make way for a new development. The other 11 potential sites are all on industrial land.

Dormsjo said he has tried to address the concerns through meetings with the Greater Elkridge Community Association and Howard County Board of Education, which was told about the potential site early last fall. The school board voted in October to acquire 20.2 acres of land at the corner of Coca Cola Drive and Park Circle Drive that could be used to build a new school. The land is a part of a mixed-use development called Oxford Square, planned by Preston Capital Management, which is willing to donate the site to the school system, along with \$4 million to be used to develop it, under the condition a school is built by 2014.

School board worried

On Feb. 24, Ken Roey, executive director of facilities planning and management for the school system, asked the board to approve construction of a new elementary school on the Oxford Square site.

Board members, however, were hesitant to approve the site because of its closeness to the potential CSX facility.

"This facility is of strategic value to this state, but I'm having difficulty seeing how a school full of kids fits into that," school board member Allen Dyer said. "We're mixing young people up with facilities that are, from my

perspective as an old airman, fantastic targets.” Dyer was an Air Force pilot during the Vietnam War.

Ultimately, after being assured that if the railroad container facility is built, the board could halt plans for the school and find another site, the board decided to authorize a planning committee to move forward with the planning of a 600-seat elementary school at the site.

Board chairwoman Janet Siddiqui said the board did not know about the potential site being so close to the proposed school property until its Feb. 24 meeting.

“Timing-wise, it puts us in a difficult position,” Siddiqui said. “We would like to get more information as soon as possible, and we made an interim decision in terms of going forward with plans for a school in that region. Hopefully we can get the issues resolved.”

The reason for moving the container facility is so that CSX can double stack containers on its trains, something that it can’t do at its current location in Baltimore because the Howard Street Tunnel creates clearance problems. Double-stacking, CSX officials said, saves money.

State backs facility

The reason the government is getting involved is because the facility is integral to the Port of Baltimore, which is one of the major economic drivers in the state. The containers come into the port and then are transported to CSX’s transfer facility. CSX’s ability to double stack is likely to bring in more business through the port and more revenue for the state.

No matter where it’s located, the container facility will be a 24-hour operation with about 300 vehicles coming in and out each day, though CSX officials say its peak times would be in the morning and evening.

CSX and state transportation officials met with the Federal Railroad Administration March 2 to discuss the process for narrowing down the number of potential sites, which is governed by the National Environmental Policy Act.

“We’re not doing anything right now,” Dormsjo said. “We’re planning things.”

By working with the Federal Railroad Administration, he said that hopefully in the next week or two, the potential sites will be narrowed down from 12 to about three.

In about four to six weeks, Dormsjo said state and CSX officials plan to hold public workshops in the communities where the remaining potential sites are located to talk about some of the details and address any potential concerns.

“This is about doing it from the bottom up,” he said. “We do not just jam projects down communities’ throats.”

A spokesman for County Executive Kenneth Ulman, meanwhile, said the executive has been briefed on the CSX project.

Ulman is a strong supporter of the Port of Baltimore, spokesman Kevin Enright stated in an e-mail, and “understands this project’s importance, both in terms of the jobs it will create and the statewide economic development opportunities it presents.”

But Ulman “has made it clear to MDOT and CSX that they must show they can adequately address community concerns regarding any proposed Howard County location,” Enright stated.